Billy Graham: Pastor to Presidents

Billy Graham often said, “Whether the story of Christ is told in a huge stadium, across the desk of a powerful leader, or shared with a golfing companion, it satisfies a common hunger. All over the world, whenever I meet people face-to-face, I am made aware of this personal need among the famous and successful, as well as the lonely and obscure.”

Every U.S. president since World War II met with Billy Graham until his death in 2018. Both presidents Johnson and Nixon, the two who probably sought him the most, offered him high positions in government—which he quickly and politely refused.

Here's a snapshot of his time with the head of state:

Harry S. Truman — In 1950, a congressman called Billy Graham and asked, “Would you like to meet the president?” Without any briefing on protocol, he agreed and went in with three colleagues and spoke with President Truman, who told Mr. Graham that he lived by the Sermon on the Mount. Before he left, the two prayed together. Years later, Truman warmly received Mr. Graham at his home in Independence, Missouri.

Dwight D. Eisenhower — “Eisenhower was the first president that really asked my counsel in depth when he was sending troops into Little Rock,” said Mr. Graham. Just before Eisenhower died, Mr. Graham was invited to see him at Walter Reed Hospital. After talking again about assurance of salvation, the two men prayed.

> “Billy Graham is one of the best ambassadors our country has but he told me, ‘I am an ambassador of Heaven.’”
> —Dwight D. Eisenhower

John F. Kennedy — Four days before he was inaugurated as president, John F. Kennedy invited Mr. Graham to spend the day with him in Palm Beach. “During our conversations, I became aware that he was concerned about the moral and spiritual condition of the nation," Mr. Graham said. During Kennedy’s funeral service in the Capitol rotunda, Mr. Graham stood near Mrs. Kennedy and the

family, and thought about the brevity of life and how people must prepare to meet God.

Lyndon B. Johnson — There was a spiritual side to Lyndon B. Johnson that many people did not know. Mr. Graham was probably closer to Johnson than to any other president. He was invited to the family ranch several times and spent more than 20 nights at the White House during Johnson's administration. Every time Mr. Graham would say to him: "Let's have a prayer," the president would get on his knees to pray.

> *"My mind went back to those lonely occasions at the White House when your friendship helped to sustain a president in an hour of trial."*
> —Lyndon B. Johnson in a letter to Billy Graham

Richard M. Nixon — President Nixon and Mr. Graham had been personal friends since 1950. Nixon was a private and complex person, but beneath the surface, Mr. Graham found him to be warm and compassionate, quite different from popular caricatures. He was rooted in the teachings and prayers of his Quaker faith. Often he asked Mr. Graham to pray with him and read the Bible when he would visit. In the last year of Nixon's presidency, Mr. Graham did not get to see him. Someone at the White House later relayed that Nixon said, "Don't let Billy Graham near me, I don't want him tarred with Watergate."

Gerald R. Ford — Answering critics of his relationship with Mr. Graham, Gerald Ford said, "I've heard the comments from some sources that Billy mixes politics with religion. I never felt that and I don't think that thousands and thousands of people who listen to him felt that. Billy dropped by the Oval Office on several occasions while I was president. They were get-togethers of old friends. They had no political or other significance."

Jimmy Carter — "Billy and Ruth Graham have been to visit us both in the governor's mansion in Georgia and in the White House," said Jimmy Carter. "His reputation is above reproach or suspicion." Back in 1966, Carter chaired a Billy Graham Evangelistic Association film crusade in Americus, Georgia, and when he was governor, served as an honorary chairman of the Atlanta Crusade.

Ronald W. Reagan — Billy met Ronald Reagan a year after he married Nancy. The two remained close friends. "I remember when Reagan was president of the Screen Actors Guild, a union leader, and a very strong Democrat," Mr. Graham

said. On March 30, 1981, after the assassination attempt on President Reagan's life, Mr. Graham flew immediately to Washington, D.C., to comfort and pray with Mrs. Reagan and do anything he could for the president.

> *"It was through Billy Graham that I found myself praying even more than on a daily basis … and that in the position I held, that my prayers more and more were to give me the wisdom to make decisions that would serve God and be pleasing to Him."*
> —Ronald Reagan

George H. W. Bush — Mr. Graham said he found George H.W. Bush easy to talk to about spiritual issues, "easier than other presidents I have met. He says straight out that he has received Christ as his Savior and that he is a born-again believer." Mr. Graham was with President George H.W. Bush and Barbara Bush at the White House in 1991, the night that the Gulf War began.

> "Billy Graham has been an inspiration in my life. It is my firm belief that no one can be president … without understanding the power of prayer, without faith. And Billy Graham helped me understand that."
> —George H.W. Bush

Bill Clinton — President Bill Clinton once recalled, "When I was a small boy, about 12 years old, Billy Graham came to Little Rock, Arkansas, to preach a Crusade." Mr. Graham would not agree to segregate the audience racially, which made an impression on the young boy. When he was governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton joined Mr. Graham at a Little Rock Crusade in 1989. Mr. Graham also visited President Clinton in the Oval Office.

> *"Billy and Ruth Graham have practiced the ministry of … being friends with presidents of both parties … always completely private, always completely genuine."*
> —Bill Clinton

George W. Bush — In his 1999 campaign autobiography, "A Charge to Keep," George W. Bush said a turning point in his faith came during a private talk with Billy Graham along the coast of Maine in 1985. Mr. Graham's words planted the

“mustard seed in my soul” that eventually led to a decision to “recommit my heart to Jesus Christ,” he wrote.

Barack Obama — President Barack Obama visited Billy Graham at his home in Montreat, North Carolina, at the end of a weekend mountain vacation in April 2010. He was the first sitting president to meet with Mr. Graham at his home, where the two of them had a private prayer time and conversation. A White House spokesman said that the president was “extraordinarily gratified that [Mr. Graham] took the time to meet with him.” Mr. Graham said he was pleased to have had the president visit his home.

Donald J. Trump — Mr. Graham met Donald Trump at the evangelist’s 95th birthday celebration on Nov. 7, 2013. Trump and his wife, Melania, joined hundreds of guests at the event in watching a showing of “The Cross,” a short evangelistic film from Mr. Graham featuring a message of hope and redemption, interwoven with life-changing testimonies.

Many of these stories were adapted from "Billy Graham: God’s Ambassador." Order a copy from our online bookstore.

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